

## The Grey Wolf & The Firebird

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# The Grey Wolf & The Firebird

by [AceofNowhere](#)

## Summary

*Alina dropped her face in her hands and sobbed. The river rushed beside her, and her heart crumbled in her chest.*

*But the forest had grown deathly silent as her sobs had deepened. The birds made no song, the leaves barely shifted.*

*The only thing that moved was a wolf, as silent and deadly as an unsung scream.*

Alina meets the Grey Wolf. (inspired by several Russian folktales)

## Notes

Day 1 Darklina prompt: Light and Dark

Mal gripped his gun with such ferocity his fingers turned white. His hands shook, but never lowered the sight from his eye. The snow around him crinkled with every tremble of his body, and he desperately tried to slow his breathing so he could make the shot.

One wrong move, and he could be dead.

He let out a breath, and the warmth ignited with the cold night like a puff of smoke as it headed up into the sky. His fingers were frozen; his boots were stuck; his eyes were tearing from the chill.

But the Grey Wolf was not more than 10 yards away, and Mal would have his prize.

Mal held his breath, and then let it out slowly.

His finger hovered over the trigger, and then, everything happened at once.

The wind shifted from Mal's back to send his scent ahead of him in a wild rush that went straight to the Wolf's waiting nose. The great Wolf spun its head and looked right at him, grey eyes gleaming. It snarled a hideous world-trembling noise and Mal gasped, he clenched the rifle—

The Grey Wolf flew to him like a bullet, and just as fast, Mal fired the gun—

A long howl rang out through the night, and a cry sounded soon after.

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*3 days earlier*

Alina scoffed and snatched the paper from the town's bulletin. "100 golden rubles to he who finds and captures the Grey Wolf, Dead or Alive," she read.

What a load of horseshit. Alina crumpled the paper and shoved it into her dress pocket with plans to toss it into a fire later.

What a stupid, pointless mission, she thought to herself, continuing her walk back home. Her basket of potatoes was beginning to get heavier by the moment, so she sang a song under her breath as she trudged through the mud and snow.

Why the Tsar was sending out villagers on fairytale beasts, she couldn't imagine. Maybe the rumors were true: he'd revelled too much in his youth and his mind was paying the price. Maybe it was a clever ploy to keep the villagers from complaining about the endless war between Ravka and Fjerda. Every day now, the front line seemed to be moving closer and closer to the northern villages, toward Alina's village. It was only a matter of time before Mal

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Alina shook her head and lifted her basket to carry it on her other hip. There would be no draft; they would be fine.

She continued her song—it didn't sound familiar to her, but she sang it like it was an old memory, long forgotten and tucked away in her bones—and sighed with relief when she reached the small cottage door to the home she and Mal shared.

She plunked her wares on the kitchen table and went out back to bring in a pail of water for washing the potatoes. With the war, it was meager eating, and she was glad enough to find food for them to purchase at all. Soon, Mal would be back with a squirrel, or with some luck a snowshoe hare, and they would be full another day.

It was all either of them could ask for, these days.

Alina continued to hum her song while she washed the potatoes and began to prepare their meal, the paper offering gold for a childhood story lay forgotten in her pocket. When she heard footsteps near the back door, Alina didn't look up as she smiled to herself.

Mal dropped two squirrels and a hare on the table, and Alina's smile turned into an admonishing frown. "Kindly take those bloody things off my table. I'm halfway through these potatoes, so skin that thing and let's get eating."

Mal groaned and took them with him as he sat near her by the fire. He glanced at the hearth, checking their amount of in-house firewood, and silently settled when the amount met his approval.

"Potatoes again?"

"No barley this time."

Mal grumbled under his breath and began to skin the meat.

Alina looked him over and smiled again, still to herself.

How far they'd come, she thought to herself.

They'd grown up in Keramzin, nothing more than children trying to survive in a cruel, mad world. The only half-Shu children had bonded together, for nothing else can bring two people together like the hatred others could have for a half-enemy of Ravka. Finally, when they'd escaped two years ago to the north, Alina had thought that maybe freedom was all they needed, all she could ask for.

But their escape had turned into the two settling together. Now more than ever, they were the only two who looked like each other, and while Mal could (and did) get offers from the fair women around, neither of them could ever fit in and truly settle.

Neither belonged anywhere, and so they belonged to each other.

Well, Alina thought with a small blush dusting her cheeks. Not ... that way.

Yet, a small voice called hopefully from her heart.

Their silence continued until the meat sizzled on the bone and the potatoes were turned to mash by Alina's steady hand.

Mal hardly looked at her before diving into his meal, chewing with vigor, the loud slapping of his jaws and the clink of Alina's spoon the only noises louder than the snapping of the fire. Alina's eyes brightened when she remembered what was in her pocket.

She dug it out then and spread it on the table.

"Can you imagine what poor souls will waste their time on this?" Alina asked, in the mood for a tease.

Mal gruffed in agreement, but made no attempt to further the conversation.

Alina tried again.

"Maybe you can find it, Mal," she said, taking a bite of squirrel. "If anyone can find the great Grey Wolf, it would have to be you."

Mal rolled his eyes. "Can't find what isn't there," he said, "isn't real."

Alina's eyebrows furrowed. "I know. Mal, I know it isn't real, I was joking."

Mal shrugged and dove back into his meal. Alina rolled her eyes and looked at the paper again, eyeing the picture of the wolf.

Menacing indeed. The wolf was supposed to be three times the height of any man and several times his weight. It could chew through an Ash trunk, and his eyes could petrify someone stupid. All the easier to eat his victims, Alina supposed.

That night, while Mal checked to see their fire would last until morning and Alina turned down the bedsheets on their small shared bed, she wondered what a wolf like that might sound like. Perhaps his growl was so deep the earth would shudder, she imagined.

Mal jumped into the bed and turned toward his side, away from her, just as when they were children.

Alina paused, hand holding on to the sheet.

"Well get in," Mal complained, "you're letting in the cold."

Alina slowly got into the bed, hesitantly facing the back of Mal's head. She wrapped the sheet around herself, and breathed quietly beside him. She could see the small hairs on the back of his neck, behind his ears (dirty, she noted, he hadn't washed them today), and his upper back. His shoulders were broad, strong; they had carried the weight of both their packs when they'd come north. Now they took in breath just inches ahead of her.

Alina wanted to reach out then, to touch her fingers to his back. Maybe he would turn around, a question in his eyes. Maybe her smile would be an answer. Maybe they could fill the night with the sound of love, comfort.

Mal let out a small snore, signaling his sleep. Alina turned over, but it was long before she joined him.

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### *2 days before*

Alina dropped the clothing and bedding down at her feet and stretched up her aching arms. There was so much to do these days, she thought as she set up her washing station by the river's edge.

The rest of the village's women would be upstream, but Alina knew she wasn't welcome there.

Unlike Mal, she thought bitterly, she wasn't accepted by anyone here. Alina grabbed a shirt and dunked it into the river's icy water; she ignored the sting of the cold and frowned as she remembered that morning.

Mal, quiet again, ignoring her from sun-up to the time he nearly left.

"So goodbye again, stranger," she called to him and he rolled his eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean."

Alina paused, and turned to him from her seat at the table. "What do you mean 'supposed to mean'?"

"What, I'm supposed to talk to you all day?" Mal asked, turning around, and angrier than Alina knew to expect. "I go out and work all day, hunt all afternoon, but that's not enough? Now I have to keep you company?"

"Mal," she said calmly, trying to placate him. "I don't expect anything from you." She waited a moment and Mal stared at her. "I do enjoy your company. Is that terrible of me?"

"Maybe you shouldn't expect it from me," he glared at her and Alina's heart began to sink. She didn't know she had been starting anything by simply wanting to talk with him. "Have you ever even tried, Alina? Have you ever tried to make friends here?"

Aina gaped, tried to talk, but he interrupted her.

"Of course you haven't, because 'they're all against us,' right? Because, maybe just like you, you think they aren't capable of caring about people who don't look like them, or sound like them."

Alina began to protest. "Wait a minute, Mal—"

"No Alina, you don't try. And just because I do, you don't get to blame me for it."

Mal shoved on his hat and opened the door.

“I’m going out tonight,” he said. “Don’t wait up.”

He slammed the door on her, and now, Alina scraped his shirts against the rocks and rubbed the dirt and animal blood out of them. She didn’t hear her breath coming in and out, faster and angrier than she’d felt in awhile, hurt and with more shock than she’d known in awhile.

Mal and she were together, a team, she told herself while running another shirt through the rushing stream. She slapped the fabric against the rocks. Why had he gotten so mad this morning? What had set him off?

Alina ignored her memory telling her he’d been cold with her for weeks, had been coming home later and later, sometimes not at all. Her hands were turning raw and red from the frosty river and the bite of coarse fabric around her knuckles. Mal had been in a sour mood for awhile, but Alina had been sidestepping it.

But why, she wondered. What was the change about?

Alina heard laughter from upstream, and she froze like a hare when her mind’s eye saw dark hair and flashing blue eyes. Alina’s heart stopped in her chest. That girl who’d come by the cottage several days ago, had looked at Alina with a sharp eye and criticized her home with a sharper tongue.

Zoya, Alina remembered her name. She had been waiting for Mal. She’d never said why...

Alina’s heart pounded in her chest and her eyes became blurry and unfocused. She turned her attention back to her chore and viciously dunked the clothing into the water and pulled it out again, slamming it against the rocks.

It couldn’t be, Alina told herself in growing panic. Mal couldn’t be ... with her. He was with Alina. They’d been together for years; he would never just leave her.

Alina wiped her nose on the back of her hand and ignored the tears on her cheeks. Her face grew hot while her hands grew frigid, and it took only several more beatings of the laundry before Alina couldn’t ignore her broken heart and began weeping by the river.

Oh Mal, Alina thought to herself. You never even tried to see me.

Alina dropped her face in her hands and sobbed. The river rushed beside her, and her heart crumbled in her chest.

But the forest had grown deathly silent as her sobs had deepened. The birds made no song, the leaves barely shifted.

The only thing that moved was a wolf, as silent and deadly as an unsung scream.

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That night, Mal came home late to a dead fire and a dark, empty cottage.

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## *1 day before*

Alina jolted awake, covered in a hot sweat near a blazing fire. She was covered in furs, but surrounded by the dark. Alina panicked for a moment, not knowing where she was, and as she looked around, her confusion and fear only grew.

She was deep underground somewhere. Not a trace of light could be seen aside from the fire, and Alina could see the shadows it created dancing on curved stone walls. She was in some kind of bed on the floor of the cave, and the furniture was sparse around her.

Alina's breath caught in her throat when she realized she was naked beneath the sheets, that the only thing that protected her from the elements was this dark cave and a thick fur blanket. She gripped the blanket right under her chin, and slowly maneuvered herself into a sitting position.

She peered around the cave for anyone who might be with her—a killer? a crazed hermit?—and she found a shape bent over on a chair near the fire.

An old woman, from the look of it.

“Hello?” Alina said, “I’m awake. Who—” she called out to the woman, who hadn’t moved an inch or even seemed to be breathing. “Who are you?”

The old woman made no sound. Alina could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She stood, slowly, wrapping the blanket around her. The fire cackled and danced before the old woman, and Alina couldn’t see her face as it was turned to the singing flames.

“Who are you?” Alina whispered again, nearly reaching the woman. She held out an arm, seeking to touch the woman or perhaps shield herself from the unknown, Alina wasn’t sure.

“You know,” the old woman said suddenly, in a voice deeper and stronger than she had imagined possible. “You know who I am.”

“I’m sure that I don’t,” Alina said. She steeled herself, but her feet remained frozen to the floor. She couldn’t bear to take another step, not while her gut was plummeting, not while her head spun from unexplained fear.

“Who—” Alina said, but she screamed when the woman turned toward her.

A woman older than time, with dark hair streaked with white and shadows in her eyes, glared at Alina with those endless depths and opened her mouth like a pit to hell.

“When your nightmares turn real, whom do you see but me?”

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Alina jolted awake, covered in a hot sweat near a blazing fire. She was covered in furs, but surrounded by the dark. Alina panicked for a moment, not knowing where she was, and as she looked around, her confusion and fear only grew....



She had ... no. She shook out her head, ran her fingers through her hair. She had seen this before? A cave greeted her, one with shadows dancing on the walls, one with crackling flames.

Alina shot her gaze to the fire, but the chair did not have an old woman. Instead, there was a girl and next to her a bleating goat.

“Who are you?” Alina says, and the girl quickly turns to look at her.

“You’re awake!” she says, shutting her book and leaping over to Alina.

The girl isn’t much younger than Alina, but her red hair stands out from any other Ravkan she’s known. But she is Ravkan, Alina thinks (knows?) and her smile seems familiar and comforting at once.

“Ivan and I have been waiting all night for you, haven’t we, Ivanushka?” says the girl, and the goat beside her bleats, sounding annoyed. “I’m so happy you’re here, I’ve been so lonely.”

The girl takes Alina’s hand and presses it into her own. Another hand darts out to put a strand of Alina’s hair back into place. tucked away behind her ear. “We’ll be the best of friends. He’s told me all about you.”

The goat bleats again, butting against Alina’s shoulder and the girl pushes him away, annoyed. “There’s plenty of time, Ivanushka, let her rest some more.”

“Who are you?” Alina asks again, and she feels parched, and so warm, too warm. She feels like she’s much closer to the fire than she is.

The girl widens her eyes and then laughs. “How silly of me, we haven’t been properly introduced.” Alina looks at the young girl’s smile and is so comforted she squeezes her hand back. “When your dreams turn tragic, I’m the one who will remain beside you, no matter what.”

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Alina jolted awake, covered in a hot sweat near a blazing—no. No! She knows this place, she knows this nightmare and she’s seen the woman, she’s seen the girl and the goat, and she doesn’t want to see more.

The flames feel closer now, so close, it feels like she’s on fire. Alina can’t breath, she stands up, ignoring her nakedness and any sense of propriety she might have cared about two dreams ago.

Her arms and legs are shaking, her pulse is pounding and she grips the side of her head with her hands, willing her head to stop diving back into these memories and show her the truth—show her the truth—

A young man near her age stands in the middle of the snow. His hair is dark like the shadows of the cave, and when he turns to her, his eyes are grey like an evening storm. His mouth, so

large it could swallow her, so delicate he looks like a saint, opens to speak.

“I’ve found you. I’m sorry it took so long.”

Alina glares at him with all of the spirit and courage she has left within her. “Who are you?” she demands, and she knows he is the final puzzle.

He turns to her fully. His hand falls from the Ash tree and his steps sound like thunder as he approaches her. Without fully knowing what is happening, Alina stands still when he reaches out his arms and holds her.

His embrace is a cage, but a warm one. Alina still feels so warm, though she’s naked in the mid-winter snow. The sun shines down on them, soft like feathers, and Alina lifts her arms and holds him back, somehow feeling, for the first time in a while, she is not alone.

“You ask me who I am,” he tells her, nearly kissing her ear with his words, “but you know me.”

Alina squeezes her eyes shut and a tear falls to his shoulder.

“When you dream, I am the one you sought after. I am the one you called for.” He steps back and Alina mourns the loss. An uncanny fear takes hold of her and she grips his arms to prevent him going back further.

“But who are you?” she asks.

The beautiful man smiles at her, grey eyes dotting on her sallow face.

“I am like you, Alina,” he says, and continues to look at her as she changes, morphs, brightens into something she didn’t know was real. “And I’ve been waiting for you a long time.”

Alina bursts into flame, and he smiles as she burns.

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*Now*

Mal had come home to an empty cottage and for a moment, had almost sighed in relief.

Maybe she’d left him, he nearly hoped for that moment, maybe she’d moved on.

But then he noticed her things were there, that breakfast hadn’t been cleared, and that the laundry basket was missing.

His hope turned to ash in his stomach and he raced out the door, not knowing what he feared. He ran to the river and there were their clothes, and there was—

Her headscarf, scattered in the snow.

He'd traveled for two days trying to find her. He ate what he could catch, which wasn't much, and he headed straight north toward Fjerda, toward her invisible tracks. He could hardly make them out, they were like magic, but he pressed on.

He and Alina, whatever they were, he wouldn't abandon her to Fjerdan captors. He couldn't. Whatever they were, they were friends enough she had earned his loyalty, and he wouldn't abandon her....

Not this way.

Night fell and Mal ducked behind a snow dune and rubbed his hands together. He needed to start a fire, but first, he just needed to get his hands feeling less like frozen bricks. His mind drifted back to the evening before last, when he'd had his hands around a mug of ale, then around Zoya's—

A twig snapped and Mal froze. His ears prickled, and he caught the sound of a foot padding against the snow.

Quiet as mice, these Fjerdan soldiers were. It could only be one of them, he reasoned, hearing no other footsteps. He slowly took his rifle in his hand, and silently rolled over to look around the dune at the source of the sound.

What he saw, he couldn't quite believe.

Larger than three of him put together, several times his weight. Its teeth nearly glowed in the moonlight, and the sharp edges sent a shiver down Mal's spine.

Grey eyes, dark like a midnight storm, hadn't seen him yet.

Mal looked again at the Grey Wolf of legend and brought his gun to his shoulder before he could think.

Alina was gone from his memory as he lined up the sight of the gun to his eye, and took his aim.

100 golden rubles, he thought, and pressed his finger against the trigger.

The wind shifted, and Mal was caught. The grey eyes turned toward Mal and a snarl that shook the earth erupted from the Wolf. Mal gasped and gripped the gun. It happened all at once: the wind shifting; the Wolf launching at him; Mal shooting the gun—

The echo reverberated through the mountains and a flash lit up the night sky.

Mal lay blinded in the snow, flat on his back from the thing that had attacked him.

It hadn't been the Wolf though, he thought, half-crazed and out of breath, staring up at the sky. A flash of light and fire had gripped him and thrown him back; a talon had lashed out and swiped his stomach open.

Mal looked up at the stars and lay bleeding, organs exposed to the world above him.

“Firebird,” he said, before coughing more blood. “Firebird.”

He said it, though he couldn’t believe it.

“Who is he?” asked a familiar voice, and Mal turned his head to follow it.

Alina looked down at him, shining like the sun, dressed in layers of white fur. Her voice sounded like a bright, cackling fire, and though he lay dying in the snow, he’d never felt warmer.

“A ... lina ...” he called to her.

His last words before he took his final breath, and died.

Alina looked down at the young human tracker, and then back to Alexander, who’d switched from Wolf to Man.

“He knew my name,” she said, confused. “I don’t know any humans, do I?”

Alexander smiled and took her hand. “There are no humans in this life worth knowing, my love.”

She smiled in return, combing her fingers through his dark hair. “I suppose not,” she said.

“I could have handled him, you know,” Alexander said, leading them back to the cave at the center of the world.

“I know,” she said, smiling and squeezing his hand. He squeezed back. “You just looked like you needed saving.”

They left for home, letting the dreams of others show them the way back.

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